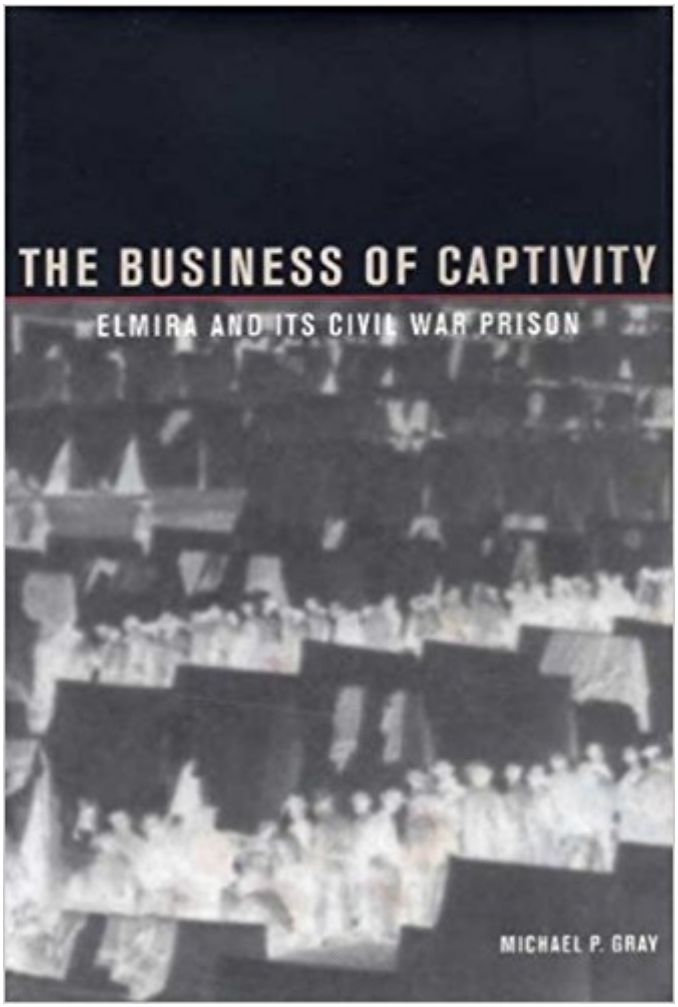
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The Business Of Captivity: Elmira And Its Civil War Prisoners



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Synopsis

One of the many controversial issues to emerge from the Civil War was the treatment of prisoners of war. At two stockades, the Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia, and the Union prison at Elmira, New York, suffering was acute and mortality was high.During its single year of existence, more money was expended on the Elmira prison than in any of the other Union Stockades. Even with this record spending, a more ignominious figure was attached to Elmira: of the more than 12,000 Confederates imprisoned there, nearly 3,000 die while in captivity - the highest rate among all the Northern prisons. The authors conclusions are based on new, little-known, or never used archival materials. In a similar vein, his description of the prison culture is especially illuminating.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Michael Gray is Associate Professor of History at East Stroudsburg University.

The book is a very readable account of the Elmira civil war prison. I actually had the Author of this book as a professor for a class on the civil war.

The question of captivity is often quite perplexing in any war and was quite so during the Civil War. Author Michael P. Gray delves into this conundrum full force and shows what it was like to be held captive in the most heinous of northern jails, "Helmira" better known as Elmira. His analysis shows that the proper handling of prisoners was more intricate than once believed and that captivity took on a life of it’s own while setting forth new business principles behind the stockade walls. Enormous

amounts of food, staffing, lumber, clothing, paper, and every other item that is necessary to operate a prison is well documented with these pages. This book has been broken down into a chapter-by-chapter discovery of what occurred at Elmira just before, during and right after the Civil War. It began as simple depot laid out to house soldiers as they prepared to go off to war. Men arrived for training, were processed, feed, trained and sent off to battle. With the troops moving off to fight, many barracks were left unoccupied and Asst. Adj. General Edward D. Townsend brought this situation to the attention of Commissary General Hoffman. Hoffman believed these empty barracks could help alleviate overcrowding in Northern prisons and do so in a more economical fashion.The train account discussed in the chapter 2 on "The Inauguration of Elmira Prison" really hits home on how past tragedies mirror what has occurred in our lives today. The conductors, trying to make up for lost time were pushing their steam locomotives to the breaking point, and led travelers into harms way. When the accident occurred one conductor was killed outright while the other slowly roasted to death. The images brought to mind the horrors of recent train derailments and how we can be here one minute and gone the next.As you follow this work you see how the lives of the men lost along with those that survived came together to form the common thread for this book. This thread is how prisons, guards and suppliers formed the "Business of Captivity" The author goes into great detail, compiling primary source material along with excellent writing to bring forth a truly awesome work on Elmira. The chapters are broken down into easy to read sections and build upon each other without dragging the reader through trivial details. The average reader will appreciate it’s easy to read format while the historian will appreciate the thoroughness of research and detail used in compiling the material for this book.The myriad of difficulties in running a prison camp as a business are well laid out and it’s hard to imagine the daily life and death struggle that took place when you begin reading about all the business ventures that took place within the stockade walls. The most ingenious were the trinkets that were produced by the prisoners to be sold within as well as outside the camp by prison guards. The "Elmira Jewelry trade" was in full swing and supplied many a lady with finely crafted rings, necklaces and so forth made from bone, wood, animal hair, or any scrap that might have been missed by a previous "jeweler".Rounding out this work is the chapter labeled "The Aftermath & the Legacy" that lays out in black and white the ultimate cost of prison life. From July 1864 to July 1865, death and sickness became so commonplace that a separate business of transporting and interring the dead sprang up. One man, an escaped slave, John W. Jones supervised the burial of all the Confederate prisoners at Elmira and made himself a tidy nest egg for after the war. He became known as the wealthiest colored man in that part of the state."The Business of Captivity" has brought together sound research mirrored

with quality writing to give the reader an enjoyable journey into prison life at Elmira. Even the endnotes are filled with primary source material and each chapter has many quotes and references. Cover to cover the reader will discover that human interest has been successfully merged with historical research. I highly recommend this book to anyone curious about fortifications and prisons during the Civil War.

This was an excellent piece of non-bias work dedicated to telling the truth of the business of prison management in the North during the War of Northern Aggression. Michael P. Gray was very meticulous in detailing facts and figures about the day to day obstacles that confronted the U. S. Gov't and the management staff in running Elmira Prison. The enormous amount of food, lumber, clothing, staff, paper and every other item that is necessary to operate a prison is well documented along with its many atrocities. It must have taken many months for Michael to review the receipts and records that were kept by the prison staff. Also documented was how Elmira gained financially by being a training area for soldiers and then as a prison town. This book is also a great genealogy reference because of the many individuals quoted and referred to. Every aspect of running a prison is covered from dealing with a budget that was too small(more money was spent on Elmira than any other prison), prison escapes, disease, flood, corrupt or incompetent officials and staff, contractors, transportation and the unforgiving winter weather. As I read this book, I kept picturing what my ancestors my have been doing to occupy the long, boring days as they dragged by behind the walls of Elmira Prison. The end notes are just as interesting as each chapter was with the many quotes and references. I would like to thank Mr. Gray for this factual and non-biased look into my ancestors past experiences.

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